New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1954

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1954 PRODUCTIONS

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of January 18, 1954*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Starcross Story"

New York Post

January 14, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Truth About a Popular Hero

Although I doubt that it was her intention, Diana Morgan has written one of the most cynical plays since the Restoration. It is called "The Starcross Story," and it opened last night at the Royale Theater, with Eva Le Gallienne and Mary Astor in its leading roles. It seems to me a rather ineffectual drama, rambling, long-winded, muddled and shallow, but what is most striking about it is the ends-justify-the-means code of ethics, which, as nearly as I could tell from its argument, it defends with a great deal of vehemence.

Miss Morgan's viewpoint appears to be — and, if I am doing her an injustice, blame it on her need of clarity — that mankind is in need of heroes and hero-worship, and that, if we find the objects of its idolatry are really frauds and scoundrels, it is our duty to conceal any such unpalatable information and go right on spreading the myth. Indeed, if we fail to help in the task of circulating it and indulge in some sentimental nonsense about the truth, we are not only poltroons but, what is worse in her eyes, members of a weak-kneed generation.

Wife and Mistress

While this is apparently the chief message of "The Starcross Story," there is another little lesson in ethics embedded in its narrative. One of its leading characters is the widow of a famous explorer, who has perished in the course of one of his expeditions into the fastnesses of Asia, leaving behind him an eloquent love letter to his mistress. The widow gets hold of the communication and gives out the triumphant information that it was addressed to her. Without blaming the lady, I doubt if this makes her quite the noble figure the play insists she is.

Even though I have strong reservations about the general ethical attitude of "The Starcross Story," I am perfectly willing to admit that a sardonic and even convincing drama could have been written on the subject, but Miss Morgan hasn't provided it. Her play, while it begins interestingly enough, gets seriously sidetracked in the second act with some doubtful comedy about catty women in action, and loses its way completely, it seems to me, in its elocutionary last act. Miss Morgan is, I fear, neither a convincing nor a powerful dramatist.

Film Biography

The narrative, by the way, deals with the plan of some movie people to do a film dealing with the heroic life and death of an explorer named Starcross. Everything is set for it, until the mistress shows up, and then it develops during the war between the women that Starcross was a monster and a fake. It seems that even his name was not his own, which is one of the less serious charges against him. Anyway, after a momentary shock, it is decided that the public needs the inspiration of Starcross, even though it is fraudulent, and the characters who are all for confessing the truth are held up to considerable scorn.

Miss Le Gallienne is the widow and Miss Astor the ex-mistress, and they are both quite gallant and oratorical about it, which is about all they could be. Anthony Ross, always a reliable actor, is excellent as the chief of the movie men, and Marta Linden makes a real characterization out of the small role of the script writer. Lynn Bailey, as the explorer's daughter, and Christopher Plummer, as the director, are the hapless representatives of a weak-kneed generation in doubt about the canonization of Starcross. I guess I didn't like the play.

"THE STARCROSS STORY"

Play by Diana Morgan; staged by John C. Wilson; setting by Watson Barratt; presented by Mr. Wilson, the Messrs. Shubert and S. S. Krellberg at the Royale Theatre, January 13, 1954. The cast:

James Trenchard . . Anthony Ross
Chloe Gwynn . . . . . Marta Linden
George Phillips . . . . . Christopher Plummer
Christine Starcross . . Lynn Bailey
Ellen . . . . . Una O'Connor
Lady Starcross . . . . . Eva Le Gallienne
Alice Venning . . . . . Margaret Bannerman
Laura Shipman . . Philippa Bevans
Jean Benson (Halliday) . . . . . Doris Patston
Anne Meredith . . . . . Mary Astor

Daily Mirror

January 14, 1954

'The Starcross Story' Has Intriguing Plot

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"The Starcross Story," which Messrs. Shubert, John C. Wilson and S. S. Krellberg brought to the Royale Theatre last evening, is based on an intriguing idea: Should a magnificent hoax be exposed, in the interest of truth, or should a legend be perpetuated as an inspiration to others in a drab world?

A MOVIE COMPANY is about to film the story of a distinguished British explorer, scientist and author, who died heroically while leading an expedition to a mysterious "lost" city in the Himalayas. His widow has devoted the remaining years of her life to enhancing her glamorous husband's memory.

His daughter finds other men, including the intelligent young director who is to make the film, ordinary by comparison. Up pops his former mistress, who has isolated herself for the past 15 years in the South of France, to beg all concerned to abandon the picture.

But, in revealing her ex-lover as a fraud, she is tricked into believing that he had never really loved her. The daughter and the idealistic director feel that the public should know the truth, but the wife and the producer are made of sterner stuff. They decide to go ahead with the venture, believing that it will stimulate the imagination of a "gutless" present-day generation.

IN ITS ESSENTIALS, "The Starcross Story" is reminiscent of A. A. Milne's "The Truth About Bladys." But author Diana Morgan has not handled the problem so dexterously and humorously as did Milne. Her characters are not so thoroughly developed, and seldom come to life as glowingly as did his.

Her dialogue is illuminating and sparkling only on occasion. The last act is the best of three. It is absorbing and provocative. But it is preceded, unfortunately, by two thin and talky cantos. As the late Arthur Hopkins once pointed out, a solid second act has saved many a play.

Co-producer Wilson has done a good job in staging the drama, despite the fact that Equity rules have prevented him from using an all-English cast. As a result, the styles and accents seem incongruous once in a while.

EVA LE GALLIENNE and Mary Astor are excellent as the wife and mistress. Miss Le Gallienne has a deeply stirring scene, in which she defends the Starcross legend and excoriates the queasy scruples of spineless youth. Miss Astor is sincere and effective a the well-intentioned and disillusioned mistress.

Margaret Bannerman, an actress to admire, makes the most of the best comedy lines. She puts a gorgeous edge to her sarcastic delivery of them. We also liked particularly Lynn Bailey, making her Broadway debut as the embattled daughter. She acts with spirit and notable emotional impact.

The ever-reliable Anthony Ross is first rate as the hard-headed, determined producer. Christopher Plummer is quite likable as his decent young director. Marta Linden, Una O'Connor, Philippa Bevans and Doris Patston do well by other roles.

Watson Barratt has designed a tasteful setting.

"The Starcross Story" is the type of play that catches our fancy. We like scripts that have something to say. We like to hear differing viewpoints aired by interesting people. We can only regret that Miss Morgan hasn't done full justice to an arresting idea. It's a case of almost, but not quite.

DAILY NEWS

January 14, 1954

'Starcross Story' Might Be Good If It Should Ever Get on a Stage

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The principal character in "The Starcross Story," which was produced last evening at the Royale Theatre, is a man named Starcross. He is intrepid, a national hero, of gallant mien, vain, unfaithful and a louse. Unhappily for the play, he never appears on the stage, for he has been dead 15 years. The people who do appear on the stage in "The Starcross Story" are by comparison uninteresting.

This is an English drama by Diana Morgan, and its method but not its effect is similar to a really fine artistic work, the Herman Mankiewicz-Orson Welles movie, "Citizen Kane." "Kane" develops when a newsmagazine man digs into the life story of a fabulous character; "Starcross" develops—if develops isn't too forceful a word—when a producer and a director plan to make a movie about a fabulous character.

Faithful Widow.

These film men, played by Anthony Ross and Christopher Plummer, come to see the Widow Starcross, played by Eva Le Gallienne, to get her okay on the script. In the course of events, such as they are, the Other Woman (Mary Astor) turns up. During three acts one becomes informed that Starcross, an intrepid explorer who died gallantly with several equally brave companions while looking for a lost city in the Himalayas, was a fake. His widow has known all along that he was a fake, but she loved him and loves his memory and will fight to preserve his standing as a public hero.

The greatest offstage characters and offstage events are the least interesting parts of any play—even one by Shakespeare. Miss Morgan's onstage characters and onstage events in "The Starcross Story" aren't very interesting, either. After sitting around for most of the evening, Miss Le Gallienne has one strong scene at the end of the play and does very well by it. Miss Astor, movie actress, presents a handsome appearance and a modest manner as the late hero's mistress. Her big scene is a ladylike fit of hysterics. There are several other actors in the company, but neither the author nor director John C. Wilson has been able to think up enough to keep them busy.

If a newspaperman has a story, he must get it in the paper in order to make it a story. And if a dramatist has a play, he'd better get it in front of the audience. Out of sight, out of mind.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

January 14, 1954

THEATER

'The Starcross Story'

By WALTER F. KERR

AT THE opening of "The Starcross Story" a group of motion-picture executives are presenting the widow of a noted explorer with an outline for a film to be based on the great man's career. The setting is Lady Starcross' drawing-room, Chiswick Mall, London. The executives are enthusiastic:

"Let's face it—it's pretty wonderful—that man can hurl a challenge at the elements. It makes one believe in the—the spirit of man."

The dour Scotch housekeeper is not much interested in the projected film, preferring westerns. The executives josh her:

"You're an escapist."

"Begging your pardon. I'm a Presbyterian."

* * *

Lady Starcross and four other ladies who have been bereaved by Christian Starcross' ill-fated but heroic expedition, are agreed that the film should be made. There is a mysterious Anne Meredith, however, who has not been heard from. (Miss Meredith was engaged to one of the lost gentlemen.) Lady Starcross hopes she will not be heard from. In vain.

"Anne Meredith is coming to England."

"I smell trouble."

When Anne Meredith comes to England, it is to halt the project. She is cryptic about her reasons:

"What's the Greek word for it—hubris? I'm frightened of offending the gods."

Lady Starcross is adamant.

"This film is going to be made—Anne."

Anne is adamant.

"No—Mary—it is not."

* * *

It develops that Starcross has not been the model husband and father of legend. Anne has been his mistress. The daughter of the house is distressed:

"Mother—was she really—what she said?"

"Darling, close the curtain. It's a little chilly in here."

But Lady Starcross is sure of her husband's love. She has a trump card, his last letter, written as he lay dying on a bleak mountain-top. His prose style has a familiar ring around Chiswick Mall: "This, my last pillow of snow, is ever your breast." He has also addressed his wife as "dear mouse." Anne, hearing this, is suddenly hysterical. He had called her "mouse," too. She slashes at the sofa cushions with her fists as she screams:

* * *

"He was a phoney—a phoney hero and a phoney lover!"

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Not—quite."

There is another letter. Anne's fiance had been on the expedition, and had written her as *he* lay dying. Seems that Starcross has taken them all on a fool's errand to satisfy his own personal vanity, to make himself "immortal." He has even done in a couple of his fellows to keep the secret from leaking out. "I think he is the devil," wrote the fiance. And yet . . .

"The man has murder and heartbreak on his soul, and yet as I see him writing by the light of a candle, there is something so gallant about the way he holds his head" . . .

"That's the end of the letter," Anne murmurs. "I think the candle went out."

* * *

At the end of "The Starcross, Story" the assembled mourners have decided that, no matter how despicable the man may have been, his legend is worth preserving. The producer is going to make the film:

"I'm going to make every man and boy think there's something big out there—beyond our shrinking horizons!"

It's all very British, very noble, very old-fashioned, and very empty. I haven't seen a Pinero play recently, but didn't they sound a bit like this?

Eva Le Gallienne brings a gracious and ghostly dignity to the tight-lipped and faintly waspish Lady Starcross. She even gives a rousing bite to the play's climactic charge to some stunned and disillusioned youngsters: "What a puny, queasy generation you are!" Mary Astor, as handsome as she ever was, grapples gamely with the overwrought Anne and reads her long last-act expose with sure authority. Anthony Ross is fine as a producer who's decided to sow weeds in his garden in the hope that flowers will come up and choke them; Christopher Plummer is soothing as a motion-picture director who's been to Oxford; Margaret Bannerman and Philippa Bevans are crisp and amusing as a pair of not very philosophical widows and Una O'Connor works miracles with her handful of low-comedy lines.

"The Starcross Story" is at the Royale.

Journal American

January 14, 1954

Take a Bow, Mary Astor

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE was a memorable decade, about two decades ago, when a long series of movie stars came to New York, one after the other, and fell on their faces in various Broadway plays. This was followed by a period during which none tried and none failed.

Latterly, because of the terror that TV has inspired, there has been a new migration Eastward, and we have been happy to applaud the performances of such old Hollywood hands as Roz Russell, Deborah Kerr, Franchot Tone, Bob Preston, and (with sincere limitations) Charles Boyer.

Add to this scroll the name of Mary Astor. She opened last night at the Royale Treatre in something called "The Starcross Story," and I think she was magnificent.

We all know she is decorative, but she has authority and aplomb and she stood up to Eva Le Gallienne, the other star, traded punches toe-to-toe, and certainly came away with no less than a draw. She is a fine actress.

Something slightly less laudatory can be said of the play itself. It is concerned with Lady Starcross (Eva Le Gallienne) and the dilemma she faces when a movie company decides to make the story of her late husband's life.

He was known to the world as a great explorer, but during an evening in which she has summoned the widows of the other members of his last expedition, there appears Mary Astor, the other woman in his life, who chooses to make ashes of the myth that has grown up around him.

He was unfaithful to his wife, even his last adventure was largely a fable; he had knowingly led his party to death in a false project toward an imaginary destination. His last letter, apparently addressed to his wife, was actually meant for his mistress.

The practical problem at hand is what do to about the movie of his life. The young generation, represented by his daughter and the callow movie director she has fallen in love with, are in favor of telling the truth or nothing.

Lady Starcross and Tony Ross, the producer of the proposed picture, have the more mature view that the world will be better preserved by keeping the Starcross legend intact. He is accepted as a hero—what is to be served by shattering the illusions of all the people who have idolized him?

Well, of course, they could simply call off the picture and life would proceed relatively as it had before. But then there would be no reason for two truly rewarding scenes in the play: Miss Astor's lengthy confessional and Miss Le Gallienne's fervent support of the Starcross tradition. And these are worth the price of a trip to the Royale.

I haven't said anything about Miss Le Gallienne, mostly because she is taken for granted in the theatre and this play does not, unfortunately, give full rein to her talents. One felt her problems were less than her capabilities.

This does not detract from a lucid performance by Anthony Ross, as the movie mogul; or the capable efforts of Margaret Bannerman, as one of the expedition widows; Una O'Connor, as the crotchety maid; Lynn Bailey, as the daughter, and Christopher Plummer, as the young director.

I thought John C. Wilson, who staged and partially produced the proceedings, had moved his minions about with extreme facility, and certainly Watson Barratt's single set was bright and legitimate.

All reservations to one side "This Starcross Story" is a good evening in the theatre.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 14, 1954

'Starcross' Features Le Gallienne Coup

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Starcross Story," as of last night the Royale's new tenant, has the kind of climactic moments that are bread and meat to an actress. This drawing-room melodrama offers Eva Le Gallienne the chance for an unexpected coup that is stirring theater.

In the middle of the third act Mary Astor has the decks cleared for her to take over with what amounts to a rich monologue. It clears up the dramatic mysteries of an old tale which has been haunting the characters for 15 years.

At this point it seems that nothing much can be done to top the situation.

Then Miss Le Gallienne returns to the scene. She proceeds to instruct her disillusioned daughter just how to behave when the ideal of one's life is suddenly debased. The star knows how to hurl invective so it pierces the heart of the recipient.

Theatrical Feat.

In this case she crystallizes a highly unsympathetic character suddenly into a woman of gallantry and courage. It is a fine theatrical feat, done with such meaning and feeling that last night she was being given hands wherever there were periods in the speech.

Miss Le Gallienne is playing the widow of a famed explorer. A movie is to be made of his last expedition, and clearances are wanted from the other wives as well. Early in the play signs of trouble arise when the picture executives link the fiancee of one of the explorers with the wives. Lady Starcross has no use for her.

The expedition is somewhat mysterious, since the men never got to the illusionary city they hunted. But their efforts have made history. Mary Astor as the fiancee is determined to prevent the picture.

Combat of Hearts.

There ensues a combat of hearts. Clearly the two women have loved the same heroic Starcross, one as a man, the other as a legend.

In the end the wife emerges as the stronger character, despite agonizing disillusionment, as she perists in using the legend for good.

Miss Le Gallienne plays with magnetic dignity and controlled passion that give the theatrical story a good deal more significance and excitement than it often deserves. She has flashes of grandeur and authority that are rare and exciting.

Miss Astor is nothing like the technician, but has a way of rising to big situations that can hold an audience quite breathless. She is handsome and most believable as the earnest trouble-maker.

Study in Contrast.

The author has drawn five quite contrasted women as the widowed clan. Margaret Bannerman is sharp and striking as the embittered, lonely egoist. Philippa Bevans uses her customary good humor and astute delivery on the husky country mother, and Doris Patston is properly chatty and lightheaded as a sherry lover.

Una O'Connor has some fine, ominous moments as an old retainer, and Tony Ross is agreeable and humorous as the understanding picture producer.

The play has a magazine serial flavor, but virtue enough in providing the stars with roles they can really perform.

The New York Times
January 14, 1954

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Half way through "The Starcross Story," which was put on at the Royale last evening, Diana Morgan gets down to work on her drama. Christian Starcross, the legendary hero of England, turns out fifteen years after his death to have been a fake.

Eva Le Gallienne, playing the part of his widow, and Mary Astor, playing the part of his former mistress, have a chance to go at each other with acid and venom. Presumably, this is why "The Starcross Story" has been imported here from England. In a more vigorously written drama, the war between the women might be passionate.

* * *

"The Starcross Story" is a decorous play. Although Miss Le Gallienne and Miss Astor have at each other fiercely, they are chary about losing their tempers. Excepting for a curtain scene when Miss Astor blows her top, they never throw away their company manners.

In a way, "The Starcross Story" is a latter-day Ibsen speculation. Post-graduate theatregoers begin to suspect early in the first scene that Starcross is going to turn out to be a romantic fraud. Being a gentlewoman, the author comes to the point gingerly through an act-and-a-half of polite small talk; but that's the point, all right. After the author has made it she settles down to an old-fashioned Ibsen discussion over the relative values of a fraudulent though inspiring legend and the disillusioning truth.

* * *

The discussion is only tepidly interesting, however, for Christian Starcross, the knight in spurious armor, never appears in the play, and it is difficult to have any settled conviction about his value to the world. "The Starcross Story" is a little like an after-dinner conversation among well-fed guests who are not deeply concerned about anything of importance.

Nor is the performance conspicuously inspired. Under John C. Wilson's direction, it represents good taste without excitement. Miss Le Gallienne, who has not appeared on Broadway in several seasons, plays the Widow Starcross with the neatness, intelligence and sincerity that characterize her acting. As the other woman, Miss Astor gives an accomplished performance in a pleasant style of her own.

* * *

The other parts are agreeably acted—an American cinema pundit by Anthony Ross; the conventional servant with a saucy temperament by Una O'Connor; the romantic daughter by Lynn Bailey; the high-minded swain by Christopher Plummer; the garrulous girls of mellowing years by Margaret Bannerman, Phillipa Bevans and Doris Patston. Watson Barratt has designed a gracious Chiswick Mall living room with fireplace, divan and tall windows.

"The Starcross Story" is a competent drama that is acted in the same key. Competence can get frightfully dull in the theatre.

"His and Hers"

DAILY NEWS
January 8, 1954

'His & Hers' Nice, Warm Comedy About Two Nice, Warm Writers

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"His and Hers," last night's new show at the 48th St. Theatre, is a comedy by two married playwrights about two playwrights who have been married. The authors, Fay and Michael Kanin, should feel reasonably companionable this morning, and their chief actors, Celeste Holm and Robert Preston, should feel reasonably content in their respective homes.

Usually, when the first few lines of a new comedy indicate to me that it is going to be about two writers—and there have been several such—my inclination is to abandon my wife, wun like a wabbit up the aisle and hide in the nearest cabbage patch. Only a sense of duty clamps me to my seat—for usually these plays try terribly hard to be terribly sophisticated and the actors are even worse.

Ordered Back Together.

But "His and Hers" is different. It has a nice warmth to it, and reasonableness, and it manages to get off a funny remark now and then without pulling a tendon. Moreover, Miss Holm, Preston, Elizabeth Patterson, Howard St. John, Donald McKee and other members of the company are very companionable people.

When we meet the writers in the play they have been divorced a year, having found that creative ability and the creative urge aren't the same thing. They've had a couple of flops, and post-mortems and recriminations have driven them apart. Now they have encountered each other again by accident, and have been forced by nothing less than a court order to collaborate on a new drama.

Funny Trial Scene.

You can easily take it from there yourself. Creative ability and creative urge merge once more—and this time the writers agree that success or failure in letters should not dictate success or failure in litters. "His and Hers" is not the quick and snappy type of comedy, and I think director Michael Gordon could have paced a couple of his scenes a little faster; but on the whole it makes an agreeable pastime for an evening out.

Most of the action takes place in Miss Holm's living room, nicely designed by Charles Elson. But there is one scene in a Supreme Court room which is a novel and refreshing approach to the usual stage trial—thanks in part to the way the Kanins have written it and in part to the way Donald McKee plays the justice who is trying to dispense justice in time to get home to dinner. No gavel-pounder he; instead a sleepy, bored and mildly cynical individual who thinks that the legal squabble between Miss Holm and Preston should not have come all the way to the Supreme Court of New York State.

The producers, Albert Selden and Morton Gottlieb, have put an unusual footnote in the program. It says, "Special thanks to Look Magazine for coordinating Miss Holm's wardrobe." Well, as long as special thanks are being bandied about, I take this opportunity to thank Miss Holm for the way she fills the coordinated wardrobe.

"HIS AND HERS"

Comedy by Fay and Michael Kanin; staged by Michael Gordon; scenery by Charles Elson; costumes by Frank Thompson; Miss Holm's clothes by Oleg Cassini; presented by Albert Selden and Morton Gottlieb at the 48th Street Theatre, January 7, 1954. The cast:

Jean.....Helen Harrelson
Avis.....Elizabeth Patterson
Maggie Palmer...Celeste Holm
The Super.....Lou Gilbert
Lydia.....Perry Wilson
George.....Herbert Nelson
Dr. Carl Halek..George Voskovec
Mike Foster....Howard St. John
Clem Scott.....Robert Preston
The Judge.....Donald McKee
Her Lawyer..Heywood Hale Broun
His Lawyer.....Harry Mehaffey
Bunty.....Roy Monsell

The New York Times

January 8, 1954

'His and Hers,' Written by the Kanins, Stars Celeste Holm and Robert Preston

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Mr. and Mrs. Michael Kanin, who have just been writing a play together, have written a play about a married couple who are writing a play together. "His and Hers," they call it. Celeste Holm and Robert Preston appeared in it at the Forty-eighth Street last evening.

As a romantic love story it is on a par with the average continued story in a slick magazine. There is a place for mechanical fiction in a large democratic country that is not dedicated to art exclusively. But somehow it seems depressingly cheap in the theatre where tickets are expensive and the amount of work involved in getting a play on the stage ought to produce something equivalent to "War and Peace." Or at least equivalent to "Goodbye My Fancy," which Mrs. Kanin wrote in 1948.

* * *

"His and Hers" does have a moral. Success is not everything, Mr. and Mrs. Kanin declare. When the curtain goes up the married couple they are writing about are divorced. Since the first two plays they collaborated on when they were first married were flops, they naturally got divorced. Amid the telephone calls, door bell rings, arrival and departure of characters and the steady comic relief that constitutes the fabric of "His and Hers," the couple is now writing another play. They decide to get married again if it succeeds. If not, no, and also vice versa. Being in a contrary mood, this department is just not going to tell you how it all turns out. There have to be some privileges in this peculiar profession.

Probably it is difficult to write even such a mediocre play as "His and Hers." But it looks easy. It looks as if all an author had to do was to insert the paper in the machine and the typewriter would deliver the finished product automatically. In the opening scene, everybody is filling in the exposition with bright patter, a fury of business, parcels in, parcels out, flattering remarks about her genius and his good nature and smiles ecstatic enough for an advertisement of the perfect detergent. Everybody has an elaborate excuse for an exit. Every entrance is totally unexpected, and welcome as all get out, you can be sure.

That's how it begins. In general, that's how it continues all evening until in the last clinging, weepy, passionate scene it turns out that love is the thing. You know what William James said about success when he was unmistakably successful in his own right and could be sure.

Michael Gordon has directed "His and Hers" with all the dexterity of a B movie. Miss Holm looks dazzling and successful as "Her." (Special thanks to Look Magazine for coordinating Miss Holm's wardrobe, the program thankfully exclaims.) Mr. Preston as "His" plays with a good deal of lightness and spontaneity. He is a first-rate comedy player in or out of "The Male Animal."

Elizabeth Patterson, looking kind and folksy, is swell in the busy part of a motherly housekeeper. As a theatrical producer, Howard St. John is honest, loyal and reassuring in another respect, too: he has good taste. Lou Gilbert is forever brightly opening the door as the faithful building superintendent who never lets a tenant down. Every now and then Percy Wilson pops in with a package and a flip remark. There's a court scene mixed up somewhere in the hubbub of "His and Hers," which at least serves the purpose of getting Heywood Hale Broun and Donald McKee on the stage for about ten minutes. Call that a career?

"His and Hers" is the epitome of mediocrity. One writer at a time ought to be enough to do a job of this kind.

Journal-American

January 8, 1954

Kanin Comedy Of Playwrights

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE NEW comedy by Fay and Michael Kanin called "His and Hers," which opened at the Forty-Eighth St. Theatre last night, concerns the problems of a pair of ex-married playwrights.

At one point in the proceedings they are faced with a third-act dilemma and one of them says something like, "What if we just forgot about the third act?"

This strikes them both as a smashing idea and they thereupon sit down and revise the thing into two acts, despite the objection that it will only give the audience one smoke, and the insinuation is that the play is thereafter much improved.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that Mom and Pops Kanin didn't follow their own logic, for I felt they had been guilty of an obsession with their own words, many of which were not too terrific.

Too Much Guff

I don't say they should have eliminated their own third act, which was quite good, but they could have cut out a lot of guff along the way.

In fact, I thought some of the least entertaining moments were those concerned with the mechanics of writing a play, small sequences which came close to convincing me that no great artistic product would emerge from this embattled duo in the long run anyway.

Maybe that isn't important to the proceedings, either, but they never made me care enough.

The Kanins have concerned themselves with a divorced team of playwrights, Celeste Holm and Robert Preston, who discover they are both writing a play with the same plot.

They take the matter to court and the decision is that they share equally in the property. Their only prerogative is to resume operations in collaboration—which they do.

This naturally reunites them and they come to the rather belated conclusion that their affection for one another is more important than a hit show.

There is no quarrel from this corner of the general idea, but I was somehow never captured by the characters. I didn't thoroughly believe them as playwrights, and I had the feeling that the cause of their original difference was extremely trivial and, hence, not exactly monumental when it was resolved.

Airy Charm

Miss Holm is a decorative and skilled actress, and she plays the part of the lady writer with an airy charm and sophistication shared, I am sure, by almost no lady writers.

Robert Preston is also a splendid actor, but again he neither talks nor behaves like a character whose life is so dedicated to letters that it destroys his marriage.

There are fine performances by Howard St. John, George Voskovec, and (of course) Elizabeth Patterson, as the faithful maid.

I thought Charles Elson designed a rather exotic, though practical, set for the New York apartment of an unsuccessful lady dramatist, and Oleg Cassini has enshrined Miss Holm in a series of glamorous gowns.

But it just seemed that "His and Hers" might have been a good show and wasn't—quite. Perhaps the authors should have had a fight and made up and written it all over again, like they say.

Daily Mirror

January 8, 1954

The Kanins' 'His and Hers' Has Excellent Cast

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Celeste Holm and Robert Preston are among our favorite players. They are likable people, who know what to do with a good comedy line or situation when it comes their way. Unfortunately they don't have to deal with many good ones in "His and Hers," which Albert Selden and Morton Gottlieb brought to the 48th Street Theatre Thursday evening.

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THIS IS A ROMANTIC comedy by Fay and Michael Kanin—the same Fay Kanin who delighted us a few seasons back with "Goodbye, My Fancy." After penning that hit, she must have run out of solid ideas, for the new arrival is a tepid, tenuous play that takes too much time to say too little.

It has to do with a divorced couple, writers, who discover they have typed the same play. They charge each other with plagiarism. The judge who hears the case wants to settle matters by having them both give up the idea. But a producer who has promoted a bankroll and lined up a tentative cast points out the inequity of this solution.

So the temperamental authors agree to collaborate. Their joint effort is so excellent that, according to the Kanins, Helen Hayes agrees to star in it. And here's where things get a little muddled. The couple had been unhappy when they did two failures. Now they are unhappy all over again when it looks as though they have a click.

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INSTEAD OF GOING to the premiere, they run away to a Winter resort. Next morning they will read the papers. If they have a success, okay. If not, that will be okay, too. In other words, love is more important than success. And there's a subplot to prove the same point, and pad out a thin script.

Miss Holm is dazzling in an Oleg Cassini wardrobe. Preston is ingratiating as her ex-spouse. Elizabeth Patterson, cast as a friendly maid, received a warm welcome from her admirers out front. Howard St. John, Perry Wilson, Herbert Nelson, George Voskovec, Donald McKee, Heywood Hale Broun and Harry Mehaffey make the most of meager material.

McKee has a funny sequence as the judge. When the contestants threaten to appeal his decision, he snorts, "I don't give a darn." Only he didn't say darn. We have a suspicion that had "His and Hers" been brought to him for consideration, he would have urged the Kanins to shelve it, too.

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SELDEN AND Gottlieb are to be complimented on having provided the Kanin comedy with a fine cast, but it is to be regretted that the actors haven't been given parts worthy of their talents. Director Michael Gordon hasn't been able to help them very much. Some of the ensembles are slipshod.

Even the best of playwrights have failures now and then. So, if "His and Hers" is a pedestrian work, we can remember Mrs. Kanin fondly and gratefully for "Goodbye, My Fancy," and wish her better luck the next time out.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

January 8, 1954

THEATER

'His and Hers'

By WALTER F. KERR

THERE'S an old theatrical saw which suggests that "if you can't make 'em laugh, convince 'em." I suspect that's what Celeste Holm and Robert Preston were up to at the 48th Street Thursday.

The husband-and-wife writing team of Fay and Michael Kanin have written a comedy about a husband-and-wife writing team whose marital felicity is endangered by their Broadway failures. It is gracefully mounted, gracefully written, and gracefully acted. It is also casual in its construction, extremely gentle in its intramural jokes, almost studiously unhilarious.

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The actors seem to accept the situation with poise, charm, and quiet good will. No energy is wasted on farce shenanigans, no line is drained for the joke that isn't there. Miss Holm makes her forlorn female dramatist—she has temporarily lost her mate via the divorce courts but she is forced to collaborate with him on a new show—a reasonable, mildly bright, emotionally stable girl.

She gets her best effects with a delectably light touch. There is only the faintest hint of smugness as she parades a new gold-plated typewriter, the gift of an admirer, before her spouse's startled eyes. She eases into the room for their first work session together with a Junoesque calm that is just a shade maddening. And when she is feigning sleep, the better to hear her husband chortle over the wonderful new lines she has written, she makes almost no movement at all seem just the right movement for a small comic thrust. By the end of the evening she has won you pretty thoroughly, and pretty slyly.

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Under Michael Gordon's unhurried direction, the rest of the company behaves as urbanely. Robert Preston's apprehensive silence when it is his collaborator's turn to read what *he* has written is disciplined and engaging pantomime. He tucks away the somewhat broader business of getting the dinnerware in from the kitchen in a single trip (a coffee cup in each trouser pocket) with comfortable finesse. Throughout, he is easy, wry, and cheerfully plausible.

Howard St. John as a sort of guardian-angel producer, Elizabeth Patterson as a servant who thinks Saturdays should be spent doing something worth repenting on Sundays, Donald McKee as a judge who saves a lot of time by refusing to listen to lawyers' summations—all are affable and unruffled in their obviously agreeable work. In addition, there is an extremely attractive performance from Perry Wilson as a pretty young mother with troubles of her own. Miss Wilson's embarrassment when she has said quite a few of the wrong things is both charming and funny; she makes a nice drowsy drunk when the going gets tough; and, shortly before the final curtain, she is able to turn suddenly touching in no more than four or five lines.

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By the time that last curtain does come down in "His and Hers" you may very well find that these agreeable folk have, after all, been surprisingly good company. You'll have to overlook a lot of dawdling along the way, though.

For one thing, the authors' most inventive bits are all trade jokes, and the uninitiated may not find too much to chuckle at as husband and wife exchange temperate insults over the origin of a good play 'idea' or as they grouse a bit over their fellow-writers' unaccountable successes. For another, the principal characters really get along so well together, and have such fundamentally pleasant intentions toward the world, that there is little to keep them apart. The authors repeat those usual devices—the unexpected visitor, the additional lover who isn't very urgent about his suit—for keeping the pace alive, but their hearts aren't in a one of them. They're just modestly fond of their principal people, and—unless you miss the guffaws too badly—you may be, too.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 8, 1954

Miss Holm Opens In 'His and Hers'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There is not much more than a faint fizzle of gaiety rising from "His and Hers" at the 48th St. Theater.

It is written by a married couple, Fay and Michael Kanin, and is about a divorced couple who write plays. It seems fair to assume that the inspiration was at least partly autobiographical.

This sort of springboard is risky. The detailed nagging and niggling that occurs between any two collaborators is likely to be boring and unpleasant on the stage.

In retrospect it may seem very funny, from a pure sense of relief, if it has actually happened to you. But to an outsider the irritations that spring from closeted temperament, not to mention talent are just trying.

A Play About a Play.

The scheme of "His and Hers" grows out of the fact that the divorced collaborators decide separately to develop dramas on the same idea which they had once discussed. A suit for plagiarism makes them share it again. When this coupling hits the rocks the play is boosted onward by a most unlikely interest in the fictional drama by Miss Helen Hayes.

Along the way a casual remark is made about getting married again if the play is a success. In the third act we suddenly discover that this notion has become a serious bargain. It is intended to prove the lady in the case puts business ahead of heart.

The play's one real moment concerns the briefly broken marriage of the heroine's sister. The lady playwright has urged her brother-in-law on to a big new job, which has just about ruined his home life. He quits the job. And his example drives the writer back into the arms of her own old husband.

Celeste Is Delectable.

"His and Hers" plays like a preliminary sketch for a comedy. Celeste Holm can do little more than look delectable, in the character of a woman who is chronically sorry for herself. Since the play is static, she tries to stir it up by constantly crossing the stage in little hurried steps. When not expected to be archly bright she drops her voice to a whisper. This maneuver is not always moving, but it keeps you guessing.

Robert Preston plays her ex and future husband with a carefree assurance that is agreeable.

Howard St. John and George Voskovec play fair with straight roles, as a producer and a doctor. Elizabeth Patterson gets most of the evening's laughs as the heroine's faithful maid. And Perry Wilson and Herbert Nelson are pleasantly true as the second couple to be upset by the heroine's ambition.

New York Post

January 8, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Problems of Writing a Play

Being husband-and-wife playwrights, Fay and Michael Kanin understandably felt that it might be amusing to do a comedy about a husband and wife writing a play. "His and Hers," which opened last night at the 48th St. Theater, is the result of this conviction, and it is filled with thoughts concerning the joys and sorrows of literary collaboration which no doubt hold a cherished place in the memories of the two authors. The only trouble is that their private jokes disappear into innocuousness when acted out in public on a stage.

Since the Kanins were not planning to be autobiographical, they imagined a pair of dramatists whose marriage has broken up. According to the fable, both of them had thought up the idea for a play, and, when they get together by accident and discover what had happened, they accuse each other of plagiarism. In court, a wise judge decides that they must be made to write their comedy in collaboration, and the second and third acts deal with their resulting tribulations. Will it surprise you to learn that they are thereby brought together again?

Mr. and Mrs. Kanin, it appears, realized that this wasn't quite enough material for an evening's entertainment, and so they have added a few minor complications. For example, there is a doctor who wants to marry the lady playwright, but I can't imagine there was anybody in the audience who felt that he had a chance to get her away from her dashing ex-husband. Then, there were a few moments when I began to suspect that we critics were being blamed for keeping the hero and heroine apart. At least, the two grew pretty upset about the reviewers' possible reaction to their comedy.

This, I must say, struck me as a potentially interesting complication. The idea of two loving souls being kept from each other by worry over the characteristic cruelty of drama critics seemed to me a legitimate and provocative one, containing excellent possibilities for menace. It is, I can believe, quite a credible point for a play to make. Instead, however, of fretting too much over the hard-heartedness of the theater's grim sentinels, the pair wisely decide to remarry without waiting for the first-night verdict.

In the main, "His and Hers" is less interested in plot than in the comic manisfestations of collaboration. Unfortunately, there is not enough wit, humor or freshness of observation to keep the play more than momentarily amusing. I doubt for instance whether it is especially stimulating to see the hero and heroine deciding that their play doesn't need a third act, but could be written in two. I am under the impression, though, that the Kanins would have been wise to accept the hint from their characters and do likewise.

The male playwright is portrayed by Robert Preston, and Celeste Holm is the lady author, and their performances are at least lively and competent. Howard St. John, an invariably skillful actor, is excellent as their friendly producer, and Perry Wilson and Herbert Nelson are bogged down in a cryptic subplot. That splendid veteran, Elizabeth Patterson, is the understanding housekeeper, and George Voskovec the lovelorn doctor. Then, there is Roy Monsell, who appears enigmatically as an arm in the doorway and an offstage voice. He might at least have been allowed to come on for a moment. I found 'His and Hers' a feeble comedy.

"Mademoiselle Colombe"

The New York Times

January 7, 1954

Satire of the Life Backstage by Jean Anouilh Is Drama About Pangs of Love

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although "Mademoiselle Colombe" is the most interesting of the Jean Anouilh plays done in New York, he is still a perplexing author. Perplexing to us, that is: in Paris he is wholly understood and admired. The new play, put on at the Longacre last evening in an idiomatic adaptation by Louis Kronenberger, is a backstage play about the pangs of love. Julie Harris and Edna Best lead a notable cast of actors under Harold Clurman's direction. And Boris Aronson has designed an amusing and flavorsome backstage production for the Paris of 1900. Motley has designed beautiful costumes. Grant at the outset that the whole production represents superior theatre work.

* * *

"Mademoiselle Colombe" is the story of a high-spirited young lady whose delight in gaiety and success separates her from her husband. He is the son of a celebrated theatre star, who despises him. When he is called up for service in the army his mother puts his wife, Colombe, into the theatre so that she can earn money enough to live on. He loathes the glamorous and slimy life of the theatre. But Colombe dives into it with rapture. Everything about it appeals to her sense of being happy and alive. When her husband tries to pull her back into his own austere world, she leaves him ruefully. If she has to make a choice, she chooses independence.

By American standards, this is a hackneyed story. But perhaps that is not a matter of great importance to M. Anouilh. For it gives him an opportunity to burlesque the tawdry mannerisms of the life of the theatre and to anatomize the truths of love. His celebrated star, played by Edna Best, is a furious termagant who devours the world. Vain, imperious, avaricious and merciless she storms through the backstage scenes like a monster. M. Anouilh's sketches of backstage philanderers and sycophants are broad and contemptuous.

* * *

Although M. Anouilh has been disenchanted with love for a long time, he has found time amid the hubbub of his play to write some tender love scenes between Colombe and her desperate husband —some ironical love scenes, too, to say nothing of a concluding scene full of loveliness and compassion. Thanks to Eli Wallach's amiable naiveté as the husband, and Miss Harris' shining genius as Colombe, there is a lot of magic and spirit in those mercurial duets. Everyone knows that Miss Harris is a rare actress. Her Colombe is a masterpiece in miniature. It is a light and luminous performance on tiptoe with youth and eagerness and quite the most captivating element in this odd drama.

* * *

There is a lot to admire in the performance. For Mr. Anouilh knows how to write actable parts, and Mr. Clurman is a man who has taste and skill in directing them. Is it necessary to interpret the celebrated actress so raucously? Miss Best, a splendid actress, is costumed crudely, made-up in an ugly style and set to screaming in all her scenes except the last. No doubt, all this is deliberately intended, but it is not amusing, not becoming and rather tiresome before it is finished. Count the playing of the actress as one of the perplexing aspects of the play.

* * *

Otherwise, the acting is ingratiating. Sam Jaffe is delightfully humorous as a deferential though resentful secretary to the actress. William Windom as a suave, ironical backstage appendage; Harry Bannister as an aging romantic actor who fancies himself as a lover; Mikhail Rasumny as a hack playwright; Edna Preston as a motherly dresser; Frank Silvera as an obese manager with romantic notions; Nehemiah Persoff as a terrified hair-dresser—bring color and savor into this parody of the life of the theatre.

Inasmuch as M. Anouilh is obviously a genuine writer with ideas, it would be pleasant to be able to take his play on its own terms and enjoy it as a wistful study of love amid the tinsel and squalor of the life of the theatre.

* * *

Instead of looking like an improvisation, however, it looks badly put together in styles that do not harmonize. And M. Anouilh's preoccupation with the nuances of love can get pretty boring before an evening is over. "Mademoiselle Colombe" seems to this theatregoer to be a tired piece of work. The mountain has labored earnestly and well. But only a mouse is born.

'MADEMOISELLE COLOMBE"

Play by Louis Kronenberger, adapted from the French of Jean Anouilh; staged by Harold Clurman; settings by Boris Aronson; costumes by Motley; presented by Robert L. Joseph and Jay Julien at the Longacre Theatre, January 6, 1954. The cast:

Colombe.....Julie Harris
Julien.....Eli Wallach
Mme. George.....Edna Preston
Mme. Alexandra.....Edna Best
Chiropodist.....Edward Julien
Manicurist.....Joanne Taylor
Hairdresser..Nehemiah Persoff
Lourette.....Sam Jaffe
Edouard.....William Windom
Deschamps.....Frank Silvera
Poet-mine-own.....
Mikhail Rasumny
Gaulois.....Harry Bannister
Dancers.....Lee Phillips and
Jeanne Jerrems
Stagehand.....Gregory Robins

Daily Mirror

January 7, 1954

'Mademoiselle Colombe' Has Eminent Cast

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The plays of Jean Anouilh seem to have a fatal fascination for American producers. Several of the Frenchman's works have been done over here, and all proved disappointing. No exception is the latest, "Mademoiselle Colombe," which Robert L. Joseph and Jay Julien brought to the Longacre Theatre Wednesday evening.

Joseph and Julien gave the new arrival the best of everything. Louis Kronenberger, eminent critic and teacher, made the adaptation. Harold Clurman directed. Boris Aronson designed atmospheric sets, and Motley, the delightful period costumes.

* * *

AND WHAT A CAST! It's headed by Julie Harris, Edna Best, Eli Wallach and Sam Jaffe. Yet the play never gripped our attention. True, there were a few amusing and poignant moments, but its stark cynicism repelled us. Its philosophy is essentially hedonistic.

Colombe is a little flower girl who meets a moody pianist backstage at a theatre. They are married. On the surface they are happy. When he is drafted into the army, his actress mother, a temperamental darling of the Parisian stage, gives Colombe a part in her play.

When the puritanical pianist comes home on a brief leave of absence, he learns that Colombe has been unfaithful. Even with his own brother. When he confronts her with her infidelity, she is unabashed. His dour way has not been to her liking. She is happy in her bohemian life.

* * *

AS FOR THE mother, she has had eight husbands herself. She has married for money and position. Love and marriage, she tells him, are but temporary things. His heart is broken? Then mend it, but don't torment others with his troubles. People have too many of their own, which they hide better than he does.

Of the company, Julie Harris fares best, as Colombe. She is vibrant in a bird-like way. She leaps nimbly from branch to branch on the tree of romance. She has affecting moments, though they are not very deep. But that's the part, and she acts it beautifully.

Edna Best is hilarious as the aging, tempestuous, hard-boiled star. She achieves a sharply satiric portrait and makes the script's bitter point with devastating authority. Eli Wallach fails somehow to touch you as the sensitive, idealistic musician. He is too cold and self-centered.

* * *

SAM JAFFE, Harry Bannister, Mikhail Rasumny, Frank Silvera and Nehemiah Persoff are robust in roles that border on burlesque. William Windom, as the betrayed pianist's brother, is the most likable of the lot. He has a measure of sincerity and warmth. Edna Preston is good, too, as a bedevelled and sympathetic dresser.

If "Mademoiselle Colombe" is an accurate picture of the Paris stage, circa 1900, we should not want to have been a part of it. Anouilh's characters are animalistic, cruel, heartless and utterly selfish. They do not realize that man now walks erect, often with purpose and dignity.

If you are looking for decent sentiment, you won't find it at the Longacre. We are grateful to Joseph and Julien for scheduling this premiere after the Christmas holidays, for we still like to believe in Santa Claus.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

January 7, 1954

'Colombe' Slanted To Cynical Love

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Mademoiselle Colombe" at the Longacre is a remarkably sophisticated play. Devoted to the subject of love, it is written from an intellectual point of view in a stubbornly reasonable vein.

The mood is one of bitter comedy. The playwright is a cynic or a realist, as you choose. He writes of practical loving, and has no time for sentimentality. Neither has he much use for idealism or loyalty.

He keeps a tough score. He does not evaluate folly. He calls it usual. Jean Anouilh, the playwright, calls the romanticist a sucker. Whether that is good or bad does not concern his wry reverie.

Noble Son.

"Colombe" is a love story of the puritanical son of a jaded actress. He marries a poor florist's delivery girl. The boy is humorless, earnest and noble. He sacrifices himself and his wife to his own ambition to be a musician. He will not accept a deferment from the draft. And that is the beginning of his downfall.

Involuntarily he delivers his pretty young wife into the worldly hands of his mother and her lusty, ribald theatrical troupe. The girl responds like a baby to tinsel. In a day or two, it is she who makes the overture to his charming, rapscallion brother.

By the time he comes home on leave, the wife is hopelessly lost to him. Her liberal morals, her wanton joy in life, disgust him and break his heart. His mother can offer him no solace because she knows he will never change.

Ruthless Humor.

The play is a daring one here, because it contemns conventions we openly regard. It is big and bold and harsh. Its humor is violent and ruthless.

It makes you think, plenty. It almost never touches you. As tragedy, it is pitiless. As comedy it is mirthless. It springs from a mind that has a Jovian way of howling with laughter at ludicrous, weary every-day habits we claim as standard human behavior.

Whether Anouilh's intentions are borne out by this production may be a matter of opinion. His Gargantuan ribaldry is implicit in the script. I believe the play could have more shading and more variety than it got from the hysterical pitch at which so much of it was acted last night.

Edna Best plays the old actress mother, cartoon of a Bernhardt, decked out as a tumultuous creation of Toulouse-Lautrec. The role is bigger than life, all overblown in operatic satire. Lustily she recites her loves and marriages, cannily she intrigues to get her way.

All Stops Out.

Miss Best plays the role with all stops out, like a tornado. It is rambunctious, huge and exciting. She also has one of the few calm, tired, honest passages in the play.

Perhaps the others have underestimated her authority. I feel too many of them copy her tone and tempo.

Julie Harris sheds much light on the character of the young wife. She comes to the theater, hesitant, wondering and shy. She is rediscovered by her husband, flippant, and sleazy about the truth. All gulle, she rampages through a justification of her affair with her brother-in-law.

Angry Coquette.

Her most artful acting is in the combined coquetry and anger with which she faces her soldier spouse. In the epilogue, sheer momentum seemed to overdrive what should have been her tenderest innocence.

Eli Wallach is fine as the husband, a role that has interesting contours, if not much inner progression. He is as nearly touching as anyone in the play, as he is left numb with inexplicable hurt.

Sam Jaffe, who brings subtle quality to every role he touches, is greatly effective as a manager, and William Windom has the air and understanding for the flippant, no-good brother.

DAILY NEWS

January 7, 1954

Edna Best, Julie Harris Sparkle in Mild Sex Comedy, 'Mlle. Colombe'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Jean Anouilh's newest comedy, "Mademoiselle Colombe," is a mildly cynical, gently amusing and quite talkative little endorsement of sin. Last evening it was given a stylish production at the Longacre Theatre and there were admirable performances by Edna Best, Eli Wallach, Julie Harris and all the other members of a company directed by Harold Clurman.

Louis Kronenberger, drama critic of Time Magazine—which says it is curt, clear, complete—has adapted the Anouilh work from French into English with a nice respect for Gallic subtleties and an apparent reluctance to wield a newsmagman's editorial pencil. There are times in "Mademoiselle Colombe" when the comedy's one point of conflict becomes dulled through prolonged use—and there are other times when a scene becomes gay and witty.

The conflict in Anouilh's fable of Parisian theatrical life at the turn of the century is between unrelieved goodness and having a little fun. The heroine, Miss Harris, prefers a little fun—and one can't blame her much, for Mr. Wallach, as a man consecrated to the highest principles, is indeed a dull fellow.

A Wonderful Ham.

Wallach, a struggling musician, has had a lightning romance with Miss Harris, a sweet flower girl, has married her and bestowed upon her a child. Now, two years later, he comes up for draft in the army. He could wangle a deferment but his principles won't let him; so, swallowing his pride, he takes wife and infant to his mother for mother to take care of during his hitch.

Mother, as played by Miss Best, is something wonderful—a star of the Parisian stage and a ham if there ever was one. She has had seven or eight husbands who have been eliminated either by suicide or abandonment. Two of them have given her sons—one, the upright Wallach; the other, a gay and handsome horse-player, charmingly played by William Windom. Miss Best is a termagant and a tyrant, vulgarly overdecorated, shrill, abusive, willful, unpredictable, tough-minded and in her own view Bernhardt's superior.

Two Best Scenes.

Miss Best is followed by a retinue of hams—a bad poet (Mihail Rasumny) and an ageing leading man (Harry Bannister) among them. The only realist in her crowd of sycophants is her secretary, Sam Jaffe, who bows and scrapes to her for his two meals a day and hates her guts. This entourage, this backstage life, would hardly seem suiting to a shy and simple little wife—but she loves it. She is tossed a small role in a play and a new world unfolds whose very insincerity gives her pleasure.

One of the two best scenes in the comedy is one in which, having received a letter tipping him off that his wife had become unfaithful, Wallach comes to Paris on a 24-hour leave with murder in his heart and receives a detailed and delicate lecture by Jaffe on the art of cuckoldry. The other best scene is the one following, in which Miss Harris discovers her husband in her dressing room and puts up a most guileful smoke-screen of denials and evasions. Once again, in this scene, Miss Harris reveals herself as a young actress of fine quality.

Visually, the production is superb. Motley's period costumes are gorgeous as they range from the grotesque garb of Miss Best to the elegant simplicity of Miss Harris' gowns. Boris Aronson's settings, backstage and onstage in a Paris theatre, rank among the best work of a sensitive and skillful stage artist.

New York Post
January 7, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Ironic Comedy About an Actress

Jean Anouilh is a French dramatist with a gift for rueful romantic irony and Louis Kronenberger is an American critic of notable erudition, perception and style. It is natural, therefore, that Mr. Kronenberger's adaptation of a play by M. Anouilh should possess intelligence and sensitivity, particularly when the glowing Julie Harris is portraying the central role. Yet "Mademoiselle Colombe," which opened last night at the Longacre Theater, is only intermittently successful in capturing the proper ironic mood with dramatic effectiveness.

It is not an easy thing that the playwright and his adapter have set out to do. For "Mademoiselle Colombe" is an attempt to present a sardonic tale of the conflict between egoistic romantic idealism and practical, worldly realism in terms of backstage farce, with the laughter at the antics of temperamental theater people serving as a kind of ironic counterpoint to the more serious spectacle of realism completely triumphant over romanticism, and deserving its victory. Not unexpectedly, a man represents the romanticism and a woman the realism.

On the whole, it is the farcical aspects of the play that are the more successful. The setting is Paris theatrical life at about the beginning of the century, and the sight of a termagant star of fairly advanced years, whom M. Anouilh apparently modeled after the famous Sarah Bernhardt, playing a youthful ingenue or having her way over fawning playwrights, managers, dressers and secretaries who secretly loathe her, is frequently entertaining. It is when "Mademoiselle Colombe" turns to its serious story that I think it falters.

This is certainly not the fault of Miss Harris, who plays an innocent flower girl transformed into an actress with an eye to her career, or Eli Wallach, who is the romantic-minded husband, fighting a losing battle to keep his wife in the idealistic mold he had set for her. There are no abler young players in the American theater, and their performances have both reality and insight. Miss Harris' depiction of the girl's change from guilelessness to career consciousness is a brilliant job, and Mr. Wallach's characterization is unfailing.

The Husband

It is my impression that what is dissatisfying in the play comes in considerable part from the lack of sympathy with which the young husband is regarded by the dramatist. The selfishness inherent in his romantic egotism is rightly emphasized and properly scorned, but he is also revealed as so much of a prig that his defeat is something to be welcomed, when it should have had a touch of rueful sadness about it, too. As it is, the work has a sort of biting contempt for all of its characters that makes its irony chill rather than wryly moving.

The play has been given a fine production, with excellent staging by Harold Clurman, atmospheric sets by Boris Aronson, attractive costumes by Motley, and a company of good actors. Not only does Miss Harris live up to her reputation as a brilliant actress, and Mr. Wallach continue the fine impression he has been making in recent seasons, but Edna Best plays the veteran star with humorous gusto, and Sam Jaffe, Harry Bannister, Mikhail Rasumny, Frank Silvera and William Windom are excellent as people of the theater. But the play, for all its intelligence, is a little disappointing.

Journal American
January 7, 1954

Anouilh's Play Has Fine Cast

By JOHN McCLAIN

It is no news at this juncture that Jean Anouilh of France can write a searching and sometimes profound consideration of the vagaries of romance. He has an abiding ability to examine at length the currents which ebb and flow in the relationships between husband, wife, sweetheart and lover.

Last night, in "Mademoiselle Colombe" which opened at the Longacre Theatre, he pursues the plight of a young husband who loses his wife by allowing her to escape into the world of the theatre, an area of lax morals, it says here.

But it seemed to me he had a rather tenuous idea to begin with, and while he developed a series of compelling and frequently humorous scenes, all of them capably written, he didn't succeed in moulding them into an entirely salutary drama. The components were there, but they didn't reach any satisfactory definition.

Joins the Colors

Eli Wallach, a violently idealistic young pianist is about to be drafted into the French Army (circa 1900), and even though he can claim exemption because of his wife and child he chooses to join the colors.

When he goes to his mother, an aging actress, to bite her for enough francs to provide for his family during his period of service the old lady gives his wife a job in her show. This seems a reasonable solution at the time.

Fade out, fade in, and three months later he comes home on leave and finds his wife has been having an affair with his worthless though exceedingly personable brother. Who's to blame?

Of course there are all sorts of angles. Why didn't the husband claim his exemption in the first place and look out for his loved ones? Well, he was a patriot (and, furthermore, he would have robbed Mr. Anouilh of a play).

In going away he was merely being selfish, doing what he wanted to do to please his ego, so what did he expect his wife to do? She might have merely waited for him; it's been done (but not, apparently, in zee naughty French theatre of zee century).

There was the added fact that he was an irasible and uncompromising creep at best and would probably have lost her anyway. There was likewise the circumstance that his wife may have been somewhat promiscuous by nature.

Julie Endearing

In any case, it didn't seem to me that the whole thing added up to much. There were those fine disparate scenes: the advice from his mother's secretary on the proper procedure for a cuckold, his first meeting with his wife thereafter, his mother's big scene on-stage and her final advice to her son. But in sequence they didn't impress me as either posing much of a problem or going very far toward solving it.

Maybe that's a fundamental difference between the French (and in a lesser sense the British) stage and ours. They don't seem to care much what happens as long as the talk is good along the way.

Julie Harris, playing the wife, is endearing and assured and extremely captivating, and Edna Best is superb as a sort of female Falstaff, wearing a prop nose and a mattress around the middle. Eli Wallach is excellent; and so are Sam Jaffe, the mother's secretary; Harry Bannister, Mikhail Rasmuny, Frank Silvera and William Windom, in their assorted roles.

Our confrere, Louis Kronenberger, adapted the play for English and I thought he acquitted himself with distinction, retaining the essence yet reducing the speech to colloquial and modern language.

I don't think "Mademoiselle Colombe" is much of a play, but I believe it may survive on the talents of the performers.

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
January 7, 1954

THEATER

'Mademoiselle Colombe'

By WALTER F. KERR

IT SEEMS to me that Jean Anouilh is determined that every bright apple shall have its own particular worm and it may be this determination which robs his "Mademoiselle Colombe" of any genuine emotional interest.

The new evening at the Longacre promises all sorts of theatrical brilliance—and maybe a little warmth into the bargain. Two of the town's finest actresses, Julie Harris and Edna Best, are offered fiery and flamboyant roles. Harold Clurman has been employed to find a staging style which will set the author's curious mixture of cynicism and gayety to shimmering. And in translator Louis Kronenberger, the French dramatist has hit upon some one capable of doing him justice in English.

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In addition, the playfully mocking fable which M. Anouilh has concocted seems, at first sight, quite a delectable one. A sober and solemn young concert pianist is the despised son of a fabulously wayward actress (she is a contemporary of Bernhardt and Rejane). When the boy is drafted, he brings his wide-eyed and inexperienced wife to the world of the theater for safekeeping. He worries, though, about just how safe she will be there.

He is right to worry. In no time at all the timid and insecure Colombe is finding the pitfalls of Paris very much to her taste. She loves the shallow and shabby players, too ("because one minute they're screaming at one another, and the next falling into each other's arms"), and she is soon avoiding emotional upsets because of what they'll do to her mascara. When her frantic husband comes home on furlough, she is as enchantingly treacherous and as ferociously candid as his painted monster of a mother.

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Even as matters stand at the Longacre, this contrast in manners and morals gives rise to some lively scenes. Edna Best, wearing a fanciful red wig, a tip-tilted nose, and a garishly pasty makeup with the eyes alarmingly blacked-in, sweeps on stage before a fawning entourage to shout, stride, stamp, and claw the air with rollicking majesty. Miss Best is wonderfully venomous as she mimics the sort of actress who likes to get to the theater early in order to dream of the ghosts who have trod the old stage, she makes a juicy bit out of the story of a lover who literally threw himself to the lions for her sake, and she gives the play's tired and acid conclusion a quiet authority.

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Julie Harris must mark time for most of the first act. She responds to the challenge of the second half, however, with great spirit. Once this Colombe has taken to herself the hearty postures and untiring prattle of her mentors, the actress becomes a quicksilver creature—wanton and elusive, desirable and unmanageable at once. Shrilling with laughter as she tries to convince her husband that she has been faithful, or paling with astonishment at the suggestion that she might be happier at home doing the dishes, Miss Harris is a thoroughly convincing renegade.

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It is difficult, however, to work up much affection for any of the embattled figures who populate "Mademoiselle Colombe." Eli Wallach's husband is a woefully self-tortured and fairly thick-headed fellow, and you're no more inclined to give him the time of day than his newly-educated wife is.

Nor is author Anouilh willing to let his gayer people escape his caustic brooding. As though to balance matters, and to keep his worm's-eye view intact, the playwright carefully underscores whatever is hollow in these presumably happier lives. The leading matinee idol trundles onstage in a worn and bursting corset. The actress calmly invites her son to "spill his guts for France" rather than bore them all with his thrashings. Colombe herself is entirely aware of the "slimy little male and female games" she is playing—and means to go right on playing.

We are hard put to take sides in this rather more bitter than bittersweet concoction, and both worlds come to seem grey and grim before the morose prank has twisted its final knife.

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In the supporting company, Sam Jaffe is briefly but vigorously entertaining as a frustrated secretary, William Windom manages an expressively insinuating whine as a romantic ne'er-do-well, and Harry Bannister, Frank Silvera and Mikhail Rasumny contribute robust caricatures of backstage flora and fauna.

Boris Aronson has designed perfect period settings: a dressing-room in rose satin and spectacular gold fringe, a backstage view which extends inventively into the wings, and a splendidly mildewed corridor.